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Espionage case uncovers faulty British security

By Jesse Shulman
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LONDON — The uproar over Soviet penetration of a top Western intelligence center reveals a security system apparently as flawed as that at Buckingham Palace.

The difference, say British observers, is that loose security at the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham has panicked the entire NATO alliance — whereas Queen Elizabeth was frightened only briefly by the sight of an intruder in July.

Stories about the ease of entry into the Cheltenham complex spread Monday with growing awareness of the kind of material that Geoffrey Arthur Prime, a Russian language specialist, may have passed to the Soviet Union before his arrest in July.

People were admitted to Cheltenham without proper identification cards. Visitors walked through the front gates without even a cursory search of their briefcases or suitcases. Construction workers freely opened desk drawers.

So abysmal were security precautions that one worker at the center described them as "just about good enough to fend off a well-meaning drunk."

The center's security, however, is no laughing matter. Its 10,000 employees sift through raw intelligence data from spies, satellites and surveillance ships for basic information used to formulate policies in Britain, the United States and other Western allies.

A sign of the seriousness of the case was that former President Carter, visiting here Monday, could recall no "leak of this magnitude or importance" to the Soviet Union during his four years in the White House beginning in January 1977.

The case of Prime, held for trial beginning in November, has provoked an outcry for an explanation. So far, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's office has promised only a "written statement."

A key, unanswered point is whether Prime was alone in spying from the West's chief eavesdropping center.

British officials were upset by the way details of the Prime case were leaked in Washington. Observers here accused American intelligence sources of attempting to force Thatcher to act fast to resolve the case — and to determine the damage done to NATO.

A mystery surrounding the Prime case is why he left his post at Cheltenham and what he was doing in the meanwhile. He reportedly was working as a cab driver until he was arrested on a charge of molesting children — a penchant the Russians may have discovered and used in order to blackmail him into spying.

Prime was believed to have studied Russian while in the Royal Air Force and later was sent to Berlin, where he monitored Soviet broadcasts and was first recruited as a Soviet spy some 20 years ago.

Chronology of Britain's spy fiascos

Special for USA TODAY

Here is a chronology of the espionage scandals that have plagued Great Britain since 1951:

■ 1951: Guy Burgess, a British spy stationed in Washington, and Donald MacLean, a high-level operative in London, are uncovered as double agents for the Soviet Union and flee to Moscow.

■ 1963: Harold "Kim" Philby, a British spy in Beirut, joins MacLean and Burgess in Moscow, after being tipped that his cover was blown.

■ 1965: War Minister John Profumo is caught consorting with a call-girl who is romantically involved with KGB undercover agent Eugene Ivanov.

■ 1979: Sir Anthony Blunt, the queen's art adviser, is identified as a former Soviet double agent linked to the Burgess-MacLean-Philby spy ring. He confessed in 1963 but was spared prosecution in exchange for information about other spies.

■ 1981: Leo Long, retired film executive and former British agent, says he was "the fifth man" in the spy ring. Long confessed to British intelligence in 1964 and was granted immunity. Also, the London Daily Mail names Sir Roger Hollis, director of Britain's counter-intelligence service MI-5 from 1956-1965, as a Soviet "mole," prompting Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to order an investigation of the entire British intelligence system.

■ 1982: Geoffrey Arthur Prime, a translator at the Government Communications headquarters, is charged with spying for the Soviet Union for nine years.